

Art as Politics in the Baptistery and Chapel of Sant'Isidoro at San Marco, Venice

STEFANIA GEREVINI

This article explores the nexus between aesthetics and politics in the late medieval Mediterranean through analysis of the Baptistery and Chapel of Sant'Isidoro at San Marco, Venice, embellished with extensive mosaic cycles during the dogate of Andrea Dandolo (r. 1343–1354) (fig. 1). Scholarship has long noted the composite nature of the artistic language of the two rooms, alternately emphasizing their visual indebtedness to contemporary Byzantine or Western models. Based on their alleged stylistic dualism, Otto Demus excluded the two chapels from his monumental study of the mosaics of San Marco.¹ In turn, Hans Belting pronounced them “hybrid and surprising in every possible aspect” and “the great enigma of Trecento art in Venice.”² Patricia Fortini Brown, looking to their formal ambivalence from the standpoint of Italian humanist culture, characterized the Chapel of Sant'Isidoro as the site of introduction of “vernacular” in Venetian monumental art.³ More recently, Enzo

De Franceschi described the visual program of the Baptistery as a deliberate “intellectual chiasm between East and West,”⁴ while Debra Pincus—whose research has significantly shaped current understandings of Andrea Dandolo’s artistic patronage—emphasized both the loyalty of these mosaics to Byzantine models, and the freedom with which they handled and adapted Byzantine motifs.⁵

The purported visual dualism of these mosaics has generally been understood as symptomatic of the underlying artistic orientations of mid-fourteenth-century Venice, still hesitant to relinquish Byzantine forms, but also drawn toward the pictorial innovations and increased naturalism of Italian art, which would prevail in the lagoon in the following decades.⁶ Alternatively, and more favorably, their artistic diversity has been

1 O. Demus, *The Mosaics of San Marco in Venice*, 2 vols. in 4 (Chicago, 1984), 2:206.

2 H. Belting, “Dandolo’s Dreams: Venetian State Art and Byzantium,” in *Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261–1557). Perspectives on Late Byzantine Art and Culture*, ed. S. T. Brooks (New Haven, 2006), 138–53, at 144; and H. Belting, “Bisanzio a Venezia non è Bisanzio a Bisanzio,” in *Il Trecento adriatico: Paolo Veneziano e la pittura tra oriente e occidente*, ed. F. Flores d’Arcais and G. Gentili (Milan, 2002), 71–79, at 73.

3 P. F. Brown, *Venice and Antiquity: The Venetian Sense of the Past* (New Haven, 1996), 39.

4 E. De Franceschi, “Lo spazio figurato del battistero marciano a Venezia: Una introduzione,” *Ateneo Veneto*, 3e ser., 12, no. 1 (2013): 253–65, at 264.

5 D. Pincus, “Venice and Its Doge in the Grand Design: Andrea Dandolo and the Fourteenth-Century Mosaics of the Baptistery,” in *San Marco, Byzantium, and the Myths of Venice*, ed. H. Maguire and R. S. Nelson (Washington, DC, 2010), 245–71, at 256.

6 G. Horn, *Das Baptisterium der Markuskirche in Venedig: Baugeschichte und Ausstattung*, Europäische Hochschulschriften, Reihe XXVIII, Kunstgeschichte, vol. 128 (Frankfurt am Main, 1991); E. De Franceschi, “I mosaici della cappella di Sant’Isidoro nella basilica di San Marco a Venezia,” *Arte Veneta* 60 (2003): 7–29; E. De Franceschi, “Ricerche stilistiche nei mosaici della cappella di Sant’Isidoro,” *Quaderni della Procuratoria* 3 (2008): 24–34; De Franceschi, “Lo spazio figurativo”; V. Pace, “Il ruolo di Bisanzio nella

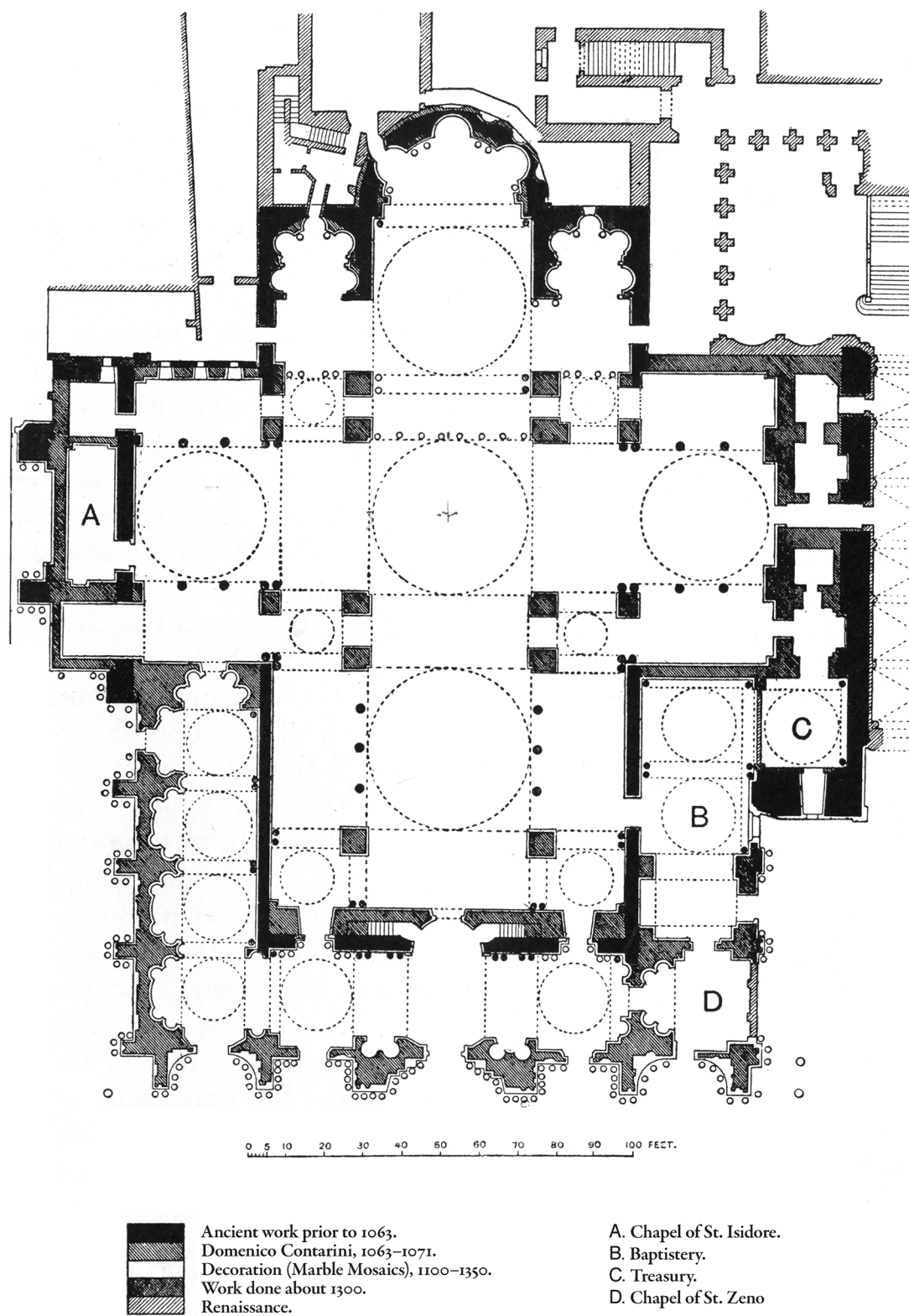


Fig. 1. San Marco, Venice, ground plan, with indications of Chapel (A) of Sant'Isidoro and Baptistry (B). Drawing R. P. Spiers; courtesy MIT: <http://hdl.handle.net/1721.3/63986>.

understood as a consciously deployed instrument of visual rhetoric, and as a variant of the consolidated Venetian habit to appropriate Byzantine art, reinventing its meaning through a Venetian frame.⁷ Either way, such artistic oscillation between Byzantine and Western visual idioms has been acknowledged by scholarship as an indicator of Venice's cultural and political concerns, and plugged into wider debates about Venetian political transformations and changing views of history in the fourteenth century, as well as into discussions about the origins of the "myth" of Venice.⁸ In this context, the fourteenth-century visual programs of the Baptistery and Chapel of Sant'Isidoro have been understood to contribute significantly to the redefinition of the nature and function of ducal authority, as well as to the long-term process of visual and textual fabrication that eventually produced Venice's self-image as a predestined city, and as the rightful successor of Rome and Byzantium.⁹

This article, too, approaches the mosaic programs of the Baptistery and Chapel of Sant'Isidoro as the visual manifestations of a sophisticated political vision that reconfigured the ways in which Venice imagined and represented its status, authority, and legitimacy at a local level and in the wider Mediterranean context. However, it challenges prevailing approaches to artistic appropriation and interaction as binary processes between two cultures. Instead, it situates the mosaics of San Marco within the complex power relations of the late medieval Mediterranean, and examines them against the multiple international challenges that Venice addressed at this time. In its efforts to consolidate and expand its *dominio*, Venice fought an uncompromising war against Genoa, a chief obstacle to its hegemony in the eastern Mediterranean. It quashed the rebellion of unruly colonies in the Adriatic, while also undertaking legal actions to stabilize and legitimate its

territorial conquests and commercial networks overseas. Finally, Venice confronted the rapid expansion of Turkish power in the East, which threatened to thwart its commercial interests. In response, the city advocated, and then joined, an international military league for the defense of Christianity against the Turks.

These events, which reconfigured the political landscape of the Mediterranean and transformed Venice's role on the international stage, are also likely to have affected coeval perceptions of visual kinship and foreignness, and the ways in which images, iconographies, or visual models were understood by their beholders. Against such geopolitical instability and cultural fluidity, to what extent can we regard the visual language of the Baptistery and Chapel of Sant'Isidoro as—simply—the manifestation of a two-way relationship between Venice and Byzantium? In what measure, instead, could Venice have deployed Byzantine visual models to convey its authority and supremacy in the East against Genoa? To what degree was artistic diversity instrumental in advertising the city's ascent in the Mediterranean, or in celebrating its role as guardian of Christianity in the East? Finally, is it at all possible that these lavish mosaics were devised not only to celebrate Venice's achievements, but also to conceal under the fiction of artistic grandeur and continuity the political uncertainty that Venice faced at this time?

As I will argue, the Baptistery and Chapel of Sant'Isidoro both reflected and responded to the environmental complexity within which they were created. On one level, they manifested the rapidly evolving concerns, ambitions, and enmities of the Venetian government and broader community at times of great change. On the other, they contributed to give shape to a new vision of Venice's role in the geography and history of the Christian Mediterranean. By doing so, these mosaics ultimately testify to the ability of images to embed complex political meanings, and demonstrate the significance of visual affinity and dissemblance for the promotion of shared views of kinship and alterity, and for their transformation over time.

The Baptistery and Chapel of Sant'Isidoro in San Marco, Venice: Piety and Politics

The Baptistery of San Marco is a rectangular, three-bay room located in the southwest corner of the Basilica, in the space directly adjacent to the western atrium and the

Venezia del XIV secolo: Nota introduttiva a uno studio sui mosaici del battistero marciano," *Ateneo Veneto*, 3e ser., 12, no. 1 (2013): 243–53.

7 Belting, "Dandolo's Dreams"; Belting, "Bisanzio a Venezia non è Bisanzio a Bisanzio," and, more recently, H. A. Klein, "Refashioning Byzantium in Venice, ca. 1200–1400," in Maguire and Nelson, *San Marco, Byzantium, and the Myths of Venice*, 193–225.

8 See particularly Brown, *Venice and Antiquity*, 34–45, and Maguire and Nelson, *San Marco, Byzantium, and the Myths of Venice*.

9 Pincus, "Venice and Its Doge." On Venice's direct references to both Rome and Byzantium, D. Pincus, "Venice and the Two Romes: Byzantium and Rome as a Double Heritage in Venetian Cultural Politics," *Artibus et Historiae* 13, no. 26 (1992): 101–14.



Fig. 2. San Marco, Venice, Baptistry, north wall, west bay: baptism of Christ. Photo courtesy the Archivio Fotografico della Procuratoria di San Marco.

so-called Zen Chapel (fig. 1, mistakenly referred to as “St. Zeno Chapel” in caption D). It was initiated during the dogate of Andrea Dandolo, and probably completed shortly before his death in 1354, eventually becoming his funerary chapel.¹⁰ This space is decorated with an extensive cycle of mosaics that combine well-established Venetian elements, Palaiologan motifs, and visual modules that circulated widely across the Adriatic in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.¹¹ Regrettably, the

Baptistry was heavily restored in the nineteenth century: large expanses of the original mosaics were lifted, cast away, and replaced with new tesserae, hindering more detailed analyses of its formal qualities.¹²

dei primi decenni del Trecento,” in *San Marco, la basilica di Venezia: Arte, storia, conservazione*, ed. E. Vio, 2 vols. (Venice, 2019), 1:309–17.

12 See A. P. Zorzi, *Osservazioni intorno ai restauri interni ed esterni della basilica di San Marco con tavole illustrative di alcune iscrizioni armene esistenti nella medesima* (Venice, 1877); P. Saccardo, “Saggio d’uno studio storico-artistico sopra i mosaici della chiesa di S. Marco in Venezia,” in *Atti dell’Ateneo Veneto*, ser. 2, 1 (Venice, 1864), 447–79; P. Saccardo, *Les mosaïques de Saint-Marc à Venise* (Venice, 1896). More recently, see Horn, *Das Baptisterium der Markuskirche in Venedig*, for a brief survey of the physical condition of individual

10 Raphayni de Caresinis, cancellarii Venetiarum, *Chronica aa. 1343–1388*, ed. E. Pastorello, *RIS*, n.s., 12.2 (Bologna, 1923), 8.

11 See, recently, E. De Franceschi, “I mosaici del battistero, fra il rinnovamento bizantino-paleologo e la produzione pittorica veneta



Fig. 3. San Marco, Venice, Baptistery, north wall, east bay: beheading of the Baptist; Salomé presents Herodias with the Baptist's head; burial of the Baptist. Photo courtesy the Archivio Fotografico della Procuratoria di San Marco.

The program combines the most salient episodes from the life of St. John the Baptist with those of the infancy and passion of Christ. The cycle begins on the south wall of the eastern bay, with representations of the Annunciation to Zachariah, his dumbfounding, and his encounter with Elizabeth (much restored). It continues across the central bay with a representation of St. John's Nativity (replaced in the seventeenth century).¹³

mosaics in the Baptistery. On the Chapel of Sant'Isidoro, see E. Vio, "La cappella di Sant'Isidoro e il restauro dei mosaici," *Zograf* 32 (2008): 117–22; and, with similar content, E. Vio, "La cappella di Sant'Isidoro e i restauri dei mosaici," *Quaderni della Procuratoria* 3 (2008): 64–77. On the involvement of the Compagnia Salviati in clumsy restorations of mosaics inside and beyond San Marco, see I. Andreescu Treadgold, "Salviati a San Marco e altri suoi restauri," in *Scienza e tecnica del restauro della Basilica di San Marco*, ed. E. Vio and A. Lepschy, 2 vols. (Venice, 1999), 2:467–513.

13 The fourteenth-century mosaic was replaced in 1628; the new scene was designed by G. Pilotti and made by L. Ceccato. Saccardo, *Les mosaïques de Saint-Marc à Venise*, 321, no. 79.

Wrapping around the western bay, the story continues with John's withdrawal to the desert and with episodes of his ministry that include his preaching and the baptism of Christ (fig. 2). The narrative then continues on the north wall of the central and eastern bays, with representations of Salome's dance, and, in the following lunette, renditions of the Precursor's beheading, Salome's presentation of his head to Herodias, and the burial of the saint's body (fig. 3). A selection of scenes from the infancy of Christ—the Magi's visit to Herod, the Adoration of the Magi and Joseph's dream, the Flight into Egypt and the Massacre of the Innocents—are clustered in the lower sections of the barrel vault of the western bay, above the life of the Precursor. A monumental scene of the Crucifixion dominates the east wall (fig. 4).¹⁴

14 Pietro Saccardo indicates that the scenes of the Visit to Herod and the Massacre of the Innocents were renovated in the nineteenth century. Saccardo, *Les mosaïques de Saint-Marc à Venise*, 118.



Fig. 4. San Marco, Venice, Baptistery, east wall: crucifixion with doge and chancery officers. Photo courtesy the Archivio Fotografico della Procuratoria di San Marco.



Fig. 5. San Marco, Venice, Baptistery, west vault: Ancient of Days with Prophets. Photo courtesy the Archivio Fotografico della Procuratoria di San Marco.

The upper tiers of the Baptistery feature a sophisticated iconography, without parallels in late medieval Italy: on the barrel vault of the western bay, Christ is represented as the Ancient of Days, surrounded by prophets (fig. 5). The dome above the baptismal

font represents the Mission of the Apostles, while the eastern dome bears an image of Christ in glory, surrounded by the celestial hierarchies (figs. 6–7). The spandrels of the central and eastern domes carry images of the Eastern and Western doctors of the



Fig. 6.
San Marco, Venice, Baptistry,
central dome: mission of the
apostles. Photo courtesy the
Archivio Fotografico della
Procuratoria di San Marco.



Fig. 7.
San Marco, Venice, Baptistry,
east dome: Christ and angelic
hierarchies. Photo courtesy
the Archivio Fotografico della
Procuratoria di San Marco.

Church.¹⁵ Finally, the arches that separate the baptismal area proper from the western and eastern bays respectively carry representations of the four evangelists (almost entirely reworked in post-medieval times), and of saints.¹⁶

The Chapel of Sant'Isidoro is a smaller, one-bay rectangular room located in the north transept of the basilica (fig. 1). The body of the saint rests inside an elaborately sculpted shrine placed at the east end of the Chapel.¹⁷ Above it, a lengthy mosaic inscription commemorates the translation of his relics from the Aegean island of Chios to Venice in 1125 under the leadership of Doge Domenico Michiel, their subsequent reinvention in the basilica of San Marco by Andrea Dandolo, and the building of the Chapel, initiated by Dandolo himself and completed in 1355 by his successor Giovanni Gradenigo (fig. 8).¹⁸

15 The figure of St. Basil was remade in 1876: Saccardo, *Les mosaïques de Saint-Marc à Venise*, 260.

16 The arch bears images of St. Theodore, St. Isidore of Chios, the Blessed Pietro Orseolo, and the Blessed Anthony of Brescia. While the figures of St. Isidore of Chios and of the blessed Doge Pietro Orseolo are medieval, St. Theodore was remade in 1674 by Stefano Bronza, and Anthony of Brescia is modern, but the name of the mosaicist is unknown. Saccardo, *Les mosaïques de Saint-Marc à Venise*, 261.

17 R. Dellermann, "L'arredo e le sculture della cappella: Un linguaggio antico veneziano per l'arca di Sant'Isidoro," *Quaderni della Procuratoria* 3 (2008): 35–63.

18 The inscription reads: +Corp[us] B[ea]ti Ysidori, p[raese]nti ar[c]ha claudit[ur], Venec[ia]s delat[um] a Chio p[er] D[omi]nu[m] D[omi]nicu[m] Michael, inclitu[m] venec[iarum] duce[m], i[n] MCXXC, q[uo]d oculte i[n] Ecc[lesi]a S[an]cti Marci p[er]ma[n]-sit usq[ue] ad i[n]ceptionem edificacio[n]is hui[us] capele suo no[m]i[n]e edhificat[e] incept[e] duca[n]te d[omi]no A[n]drea Da[n]-dulo, i[n]clito Venec[iarum] duce [et] t[em]p[or]e nobiliu[m] viro[rum] d[omi]nor[um] Marci Lauredano [et] Ioh[annis] Delphin[o], p[ro]cur[atorum] ecc[lesi]e S[an]cti Marci [et] com[ple]cte duca[n]te d[omi]no Ioha[n]ne G[ra]do[n]icho i[n]clit[o] Venec[iarum] Duce [et] t[em]p[or]e nobiliu[m] viro[rum] d[omi]nor[um] Marci Lauredano [et] Nicolai Lio[n] et Ioh[annis] Delphin[o] p[ro]cur[atorum] ecc[lesi]e s[an]cti Marci i[n] MCCCLV, me[n]se Julii, die X. (In this very tomb is enclosed the body of St. Isidore, which was brought from Chios to Venice by Lord Domenico Michiel, the illustrious doge of the Venetians, in 1125, which [body] remained secretly in the Church of San Marco until the beginning of the construction of this Chapel, [which was] built in his name [and] begun during the rule of Lord Andrea Dandolo, the illustrious doge of the Venetians, and at the time of the noble gentlemen Lords Marco Loredan and Giovanni Dolfín, procurators of the Church of San Marco. [The Chapel] was completed during the rule of Lord Giovanni Gradenigo, the illustrious doge of the Venetians, and at the time of the noble gentlemen Lords

The Chapel also features an extensive mosaic program. This depicts the most significant episodes of the life of St. Isidore and his martyrdom on the south side of the vault, while the north side, which is visible from the entrance of the Chapel, bears representations of Isidore's entombment, the arrival of the Venetian army in Chios, the invention of the saint's body, and its translation to Venice (fig. 9).¹⁹ A monumental image of Christ, seated between St. Mark and St. Isidore, takes up the east wall (fig. 8), while an effigy of the Virgin between St. John the Baptist and St. Nicholas occupies the opposite wall.

On one level, the mosaic cycles in the Baptistry and Chapel of Sant'Isidoro may be explained as refined, but altogether ordinary, religious programs. In keeping with the dedication to St. Isidore and with Venice's established tradition of legitimating relic acquisition through images, the Chapel celebrates the deeds of the Eastern martyr, and sanctions Venice's claims as his resting place through a detailed visual description of the wondrous invention and translation of the saint's body. The representation of Isidore next to Christ and St. Mark in the east wall lunette further advertises his connections with Venice, as well as casts this relatively lesser saint as the like of the evangelist. Furthermore, the Deesis-style composition of the scene, and Christ's

Marco Loredan, Nicolò Lion, and Giovanni Dolfín, procurators of the Church of San Marco, on 10 July 1355). The inscription is transcribed in M. Andaloro and O. Demus, eds., *San Marco: Basilica patriarcale in Venezia*, 2 vols. (Milano, 1990), 2:196. Translation is mine. Andrea Dandolo's reinvention of St. Isidore's body in the Basilica, and his involvement with the construction of the Chapel dedicated to the saint, are also mentioned in Caresini, *Chronica*, 8. For a discussion of the above inscription, and of the political implications of the decorative program of the Chapel of Sant'Isidoro, see S. Gerevini, "Inscribing History, (Over)Writing Politics: Word and Image in the Chapel of Sant'Isidoro at San Marco, Venice," in *Sacred Scripture/Sacred Space: The Interlacing of Real Places and Conceptual Spaces in Medieval Art and Architecture*, ed. T. Frese, W. E. Keil, and K. Krüger (Berlin, 2019), 323–50.

19 The invention and translation of the body of St. Isidore from the island of Chios to Venice in 1125 were allegedly recorded in writing by one of the protagonists of the event: Cerbanus Cerbani, "Translatio mirifici martyris Isidori a Chio insula in civitatem Venetam," in RHC HOcc, 5:321–34. Nevertheless, the earliest surviving copy of this text dates from the fourteenth century. For further information, see M. Palma, "Cerbani, Cerbano," in *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani* (Rome, 1979), [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/cerbano-cerbani_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/cerbano-cerbani_(Dizionario-Biografico)/).



Fig. 8. San Marco, Venice, Chapel of Sant'Isidoro, view eastward: sculpted shrine; dedicatory inscription and Christ enthroned between St. Isidore and St. Mark. Photo courtesy the Archivio Fotografico della Procuratoria di San Marco.



Fig. 9. San Marco, Venice, Chapel of Sant'Isidoro, vault (north side): St. Isidore's entombment in Chios (lower register, northwest corner); arrival of the Venetian army in Chios (upper register, northwest corner); and, proceeding eastward, *inventio* of St. Isidore in Chios by Cerbanus

Cerbanus; Cerbanus is reprimanded by the doge; translation of Isidore's body from Chios to Venice. Lower register, northeast corner: arrival of St. Isidore's body at San Marco. Photo courtesy the Archivio Fotografico della Procuratoria di San Marco.

hieratic, frontal pose enhance the sacredness and solemnity of the whole space (fig. 8).

The imagery in the Baptistery can also be explained in the light of its liturgical function, as well as in relation to other late medieval baptismal cycles in northern and central Italy. Most of the wall space is devoted to the life of St. John, with the martyrdom of the saint fittingly placed nearest the mosaic of the Crucifixion of Christ, to signal their kinship during their lifetime and in their deaths. The program is also readily understandable in relation to the function of the space and its symbolism. St. John the Baptist, the last of a long succession of Old Testament prophets, was witness to the coming of Christ to the world. His figure is, therefore, one of mediation between the Old and New Testaments. The decorative program of the Baptistery articulates precisely this message, situating the life and *passio* of St. John between the group of prophetic figures, clustered in the western vault, and the Infancy and Passion of Christ on the east and west walls of the Chapel.

In a carefully constructed sequence of images, the iconography of the Baptistery unfolds the history (and destiny) of human salvation, from the Old Testament prophetic announcements to the fulfillment of those prophecies in the advent and death of the Savior. The domes that surmount the central and eastern bays may also be explained in these terms, as well as in connection with the actual liturgy performed in the room. The figures of the apostles performing baptism in the central dome hover just above the baptismal font, offering a mirror image of the actual ritual that took place in the space below, and demonstrating visually the contiguity between biblical events and their historical and liturgical re-enactment. Finally, the eastern dome with its imaginative rendition of the hierarchies of angels and Christ as all ruler would recall images of the Last Judgment and project the biblical events represented in the Baptistery, as well as the lives of those baptized within this space, into the teleology of human salvation.

The two rooms, however, present us with a number of peculiarities—the most obvious of which is the representation of a doge within the scene of the Crucifixion on the east wall of the Baptistery (fig. 4). Baptism was understood as a spiritual death and rebirth akin to Christ's own crucifixion and resurrection, so the choice of the episode is consistent with the function of the room, and with the overall emphasis of its visual program on questions of death, judgment,

and redemption.²⁰ However, the inclusion of the doge injects the scene, and the entire iconographic program, with local significance and political overtones. These are further accentuated by the two kneeling characters at the corners of the lunette, whose civil clothing identifies them as public officers, most likely members of the chancery.²¹ The mosaics in the Chapel of Sant'Isidoro display a similar insistence on the political: Doge Domenico Michiel, dressed in full ceremonial garment, appears in several scenes of the translation of St. Isidore, simultaneously acting as witness of the holy theft of 1125 and as guarantor of its legitimacy (fig. 9).

The emphatic presence of the Venetian political elite in these mosaics has justly encouraged scholars to understand the visual programs of the Baptistery and Chapel of Sant'Isidoro as tokens of visual propaganda, and to connect them to the ongoing revision of the inspiring principles and organs of the Venetian government.²² However, the multiple international challenges that Venice addressed at this time are also likely to have informed the choice of imagery in the two shrines, and to have influenced the ways in which coeval viewers would understand them.

Facing Conflict: The Baptistery and Chapel of Sant'Isidoro in the Context of the Venetian–Genoese Wars

As Venice strove to expand and consolidate its commercial and territorial presence in the Mediterranean in the fourteenth century, its aspirations inevitably

20 On the iconography of the Baptistery as dominated by concerns about death and salvation, and in relation to its double function as baptismal space and funerary chapel, see Horn, *Das Baptisterium der Markuskirche in Venedig*. On the theological connections between baptism and the sufferings of Christ, see J. G. Davies, *The Architectural Setting of Baptism* (London, 1962), 14 and 22.

21 The man on the left, sporting an ermine-lined hat, is generally identified as the Grand Chancellor. The identity of the character on the right has generated a number of identifications. Most recently, D. Pincus has identified him as a young member of the nobility entering the *cursus honorum*. Pincus, "Venice and Its Doge," 271, with references to prior interpretations.

22 See particularly D. Pincus, "Hard Times and Ducal Radiance: Andrea Dandolo and the Construction of the Ruler in Fourteenth-Century Venice," in *Venice Reconsidered: The History and Civilization of an Italian City-State, 1297–1797*, ed. J. J. Martin and D. Romano (Venice, 2000), 89–136; and Pincus, "Venice and Its Doge."

came into collision with those of another prevailing sea power, Genoa. Between 1256 and 1380, Venice was enmeshed in intermittent wars against Genoa over the commercial and territorial control of the eastern Mediterranean. The struggle between the two sea powers alternately took the form of open military confrontation, commercial war, and diplomatic scheming, drawing numerous other principalities, including Byzantium, to join the fray, and causing ceaseless geopolitical realignments throughout the fourteenth century.²³ In 1350–1355, when work on the Baptistery and Chapel of Sant’Isidoro was underway, Venice and Genoa resumed open war, fighting a series of ferocious naval battles in the Aegean Sea and off the coasts of Sardinia. In 1354, the year of Dandolo’s death and the presumed date of completion of the Baptistery, the Venetian commander Niccolò Pisani attempted to provoke Genoa into battle off the island of Chios, and was subsequently defeated at Porto Longo, off the southern coast of the Peloponnese, before the two sea powers, exhausted by their prolonged military efforts, signed a truce in 1355.²⁴

The war between Genoa and Venice was a matter of pressing concern for many Mediterranean principalities. The papacy attempted to persuade the two powers to cease fire.²⁵ And Petrarch, Andrea Dandolo’s close acquaintance, sent several pleas for peace to the doge, first as a private citizen and then, more formally, as diplomatic envoy.²⁶ The doge’s response to one of

Petrarch’s missives, written shortly after the resumption of war, is revealing of Venetian sentiments toward the enemy:

Bellum ita suscepimus ut nihil aliud quam pacem honorabilem patrie, que vita nostra nobis est carior, querere videamur, et quemadmodum superbe ac violenter nos agere si aspernemur placatum cedentemque hostem, sic nunc, cum prope confractum resistantem ac tergiversantem traxerimus, nulla verecundia sumus obstricti si bella hos contra permittimus qui pacem pati minime potuerunt.

We have waged war so that it will appear that we seek nothing else than an honorable peace for our homeland, which is dearer to us than our own life; and, in the same way as we would act arrogantly and violently if we spurned an enemy (who was) placated and submissive, so now we are not withheld by any compunction in permitting (ourselves a) war against those who could not hold peace in lesser regard—given that we will have drawn them (into war) almost broken, (and yet) resisting and tergiversating.²⁷

Dandolo’s letter is a masterpiece of official rhetoric, simultaneously voicing the distress that accompanied the decision of the government to wage war, the indignation against the rival city, cast as an enemy of peace, and the patriotic stance of the doge. This passage, and the historical circumstances it refers to, provide useful frameworks of interpretation for the monumental image on the east wall of the Baptistery, where the doge and chancery officers gather in prayer at the feet of the cross, surrounded by the holy patrons of Venice.

Baptisteries fulfilled key civic functions in late medieval Italian city-states. The rite of Christian initiation gave children family names and political rights, making them citizens.²⁸ For this reason, baptisteries

23 An excellent introduction to the conflict is M. Balard, “La lotta contro Genova,” in *Storia di Venezia: Dalle origini alla caduta della Serenissima*, vol. 3, *La formazione dello Stato patrizio*, ed. G. Arnaldi, G. Cracco, and A. Tenenti (Rome, 1997), 87–126, http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/la-formazione-dello-stato-patrizio-le-sfide-esterne-la-lotta-contro-genova_%28Storia-di-Venezia%29/. The standard reference works on the involvement of the two sea powers in the East are M. Balard, *La Romanie génoise: XII^e–début du XV^e siècle*, Bibliothèque des Écoles Françaises d’Athènes et de Rome, fasc. 235 (Rome, 1978); and F. Thiriet, *La Romanie vénitienne au Moyen Âge: Le développement et l’exploitation du domaine colonial vénitien, (XII^e–XV^e siècle)* (Paris, 1959).

24 V. Lazzarini, “La battaglia di Porto Longo nell’isola di Sapienza,” *NAVEn* 8, no. 1 (1894): 5–25.

25 E. Deprez and G. Mollat, *Clément VI (1342–1352): Lettres closes, patentes et curiales, intéressant les pays autres que la France*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1960–61), fasc. 2:291, no. 2107, dated 24 November 1349.

26 On the relationship between Dandolo and Petrarch, see L. Lazzarini, “‘Dux ille Danduleus’: Andrea Dandolo e la cultura veneziana a metà del Trecento,” in *Petrarca, Venezia e il Veneto*, ed. G. Padoan (Florence, 1976), 123–56.

27 Dated 22 May 1351; published in G. Arnaldi, “Andrea Dandolo doge-cronista,” in idem, *Cronache e cronisti dell’Italia comunale* (Spoleto, 2016), 165–298, at 285. Arnaldi’s essay was originally published as G. Arnaldi, “Andrea Dandolo doge-cronista,” in *La storiografia veneziana fino al secolo XVI: Aspetti e problemi*, ed. A. Pertusi (Florence, 1970), 127–268. The translation of the excerpt is mine.

28 E. Cattaneo, “Il battistero in Italia dopo il Mille,” in *Miscellanea Gilles Gérard Meersseman*, 2 vols. (Padua, 1970), 1:171–95; P. J.

were the *loci* where communal ties were renewed, and where the city, in its conflicting parts, was resolved into unity.²⁹ As such, they represented ideal sites to articulate messages of communal prayer. The Crucifixion mosaic did exactly that: kneeling at the feet of the cross, the leader of the city and his retinue, afflicted by the new phase of violent conflict, beseeched the help of all their supernatural patrons. However, as Debra Pincus has suggested, by situating the supplicant doge in a privileged position at the feet of Christ, the mosaic also implicitly places him in full view of God's plans for humankind, and of Venice's rightful place within those plans.³⁰ Therefore, the image also operated as a powerful assertion of Venice's (real or pretended) self-assurance.

The dual significance of the Crucifixion mosaic, as an act of public piety and as a visual articulation of Venice's self-perceived position in the Christian cosmos, provides a useful roadmap to interpret the overall meaning of the Baptistery and Chapel of Sant'Isidoro. The two rooms were redecorated when the conflict with Genoa reached a new climax, and—as I discuss below—they assumed into the Venetian holy pantheon two saints who bore significant associations with the rival city. Marshaling evidence of St. Isidore's and St. John's favor toward Venice, Dandolo's chapels not only reinvigorated Venetian piety, but also activated it in the service of the city's polemical stance against Genoa.

The reinvention of St. Isidore in San Marco and the dedication of a new lavish chapel to him were particularly timely. As mentioned above, the martyr's body had allegedly been translated to Venice in 1125 by Doge Domenico Michiel. However, his cult is very poorly attested in Venice before the fourteenth century. The

earliest surviving manuscript recording his *translatio*, purportedly written by eyewitness Cerbanus Cerbani in the twelfth century, dates from the mid- or late Trecento. The earliest Venetian liturgical books that commemorate the saint date from the 1340s. And Andrea Dandolo, who had omitted the account of the translation of Isidore's body to Venice in his earlier historical work, included the episode in his later *Chronica extensa*, composed after his election as doge in 1343.³¹ As Michele Tomasi and Rona Goffen have also noted, the origins of St. Isidore in Chios, an island whose possession was an object of fierce contention between Genoa and Venice, indicate that the revival of the saint's cult in the lagoon was anything but fortuitous. In this context, the significance of the textual and visual apparatus of the Chapel of Sant'Isidoro in constructing and disseminating the image of the saint, and in sustaining his connections to Venice against Genoa, can hardly be overestimated.³²

In 1125, the alleged date of St. Isidore's translation to Venice, Chios was formally under Byzantine rule. However, Venetian merchants enjoyed freedom of trade in the island throughout the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, and briefly occupied Chios in the 1170s.³³ Venice's presence in Chios ended in 1261, when the Byzantine emperors, once they reconquered Constantinople with the military aid of the Genoese, gifted the island to Venice's rival. Chios remained in Genoese hands until 1566. In 1346, after a brief spell as a semi-independent principality ruled by the Genoese aristocratic family of the Zaccaria (1304–1329), and after an equally short-lived return of Byzantine rule in 1329, the island was put under the direct control of the Genoese government, and administered through a chartered company.³⁴ In the 1350s, when

Cramer, *Baptism and Change in the Early Middle Ages, c. 200–c. 1150* (Cambridge, 1993); L. V. Geymonat, "The Parma Baptistery and Its Pictorial Program," 2 vols. (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2006); A. Thompson, *Cities of God: The Religion of the Italian Communes, 1125–1325* (University Park, PA, 2005). On the complex ritual, liturgical, and visual environments of medieval baptism, and on the social implications of baptistery decoration in Trecento Italy, see now Anne Derbes, *Ritual, Gender, and Narrative in Late Medieval Italy: Fina Buzzaccarini and the Baptistery of Padua* (forthcoming, Turnhout [2020]). I am deeply grateful to Anne Derbes for generously sharing her manuscript prior to its publication.

29 Thompson, *Cities of God*, 312. Cramer, *Baptism and Change*, 268. See the very useful literature review in Geymonat, "Parma Baptistery and Its Pictorial Program," 189–91.

30 Pincus, "Venice and Its Doge," 270–71.

31 See the careful review of sources in M. Tomasi, "Prima, dopo, attorno alla cappella: Il culto di Sant'Isidoro a Venezia," *Quaderni della Procuratoria* 3 (2008): 15–23, at 17.

32 R. Goffen, "Paolo Veneziano e Andrea Dandolo: Una nuova lettura della pala feriale," in *La pala d'oro*, ed. H. R. Hahnloser and R. Polacco (Venice, 1994), 173–84, at 183–84; and Tomasi, "Prima, dopo, attorno," 20.

33 Thiriet, *La Romanie venitienne*, 52 and 60.

34 P. Lock, *The Franks in the Aegean, 1204–1500* (London, 1995), 158–59. For a brief introduction to Chios and its history, see T. E. Gregory, "Chios," *ODB* 1:423–24. More generally, on the Genoese and Venetian presence in the Aegean, see M. Balard, "Latins in the Aegean and the Balkans in the Fourteenth Century," in *The New*



Fig. 10.
(above) San Marco, Venice, Zen Chapel, vault: St. Mark arrives in Alexandria (thirteenth century). Photo courtesy the Archivio Fotografico della Procuratoria di San Marco.



Fig. 11.
(right) San Marco, Venice, Chapel of Sant'Isidoro: departure of St. Isidore from Alexandria. Photo courtesy the Archivio Fotografico della Procuratoria di San Marco.

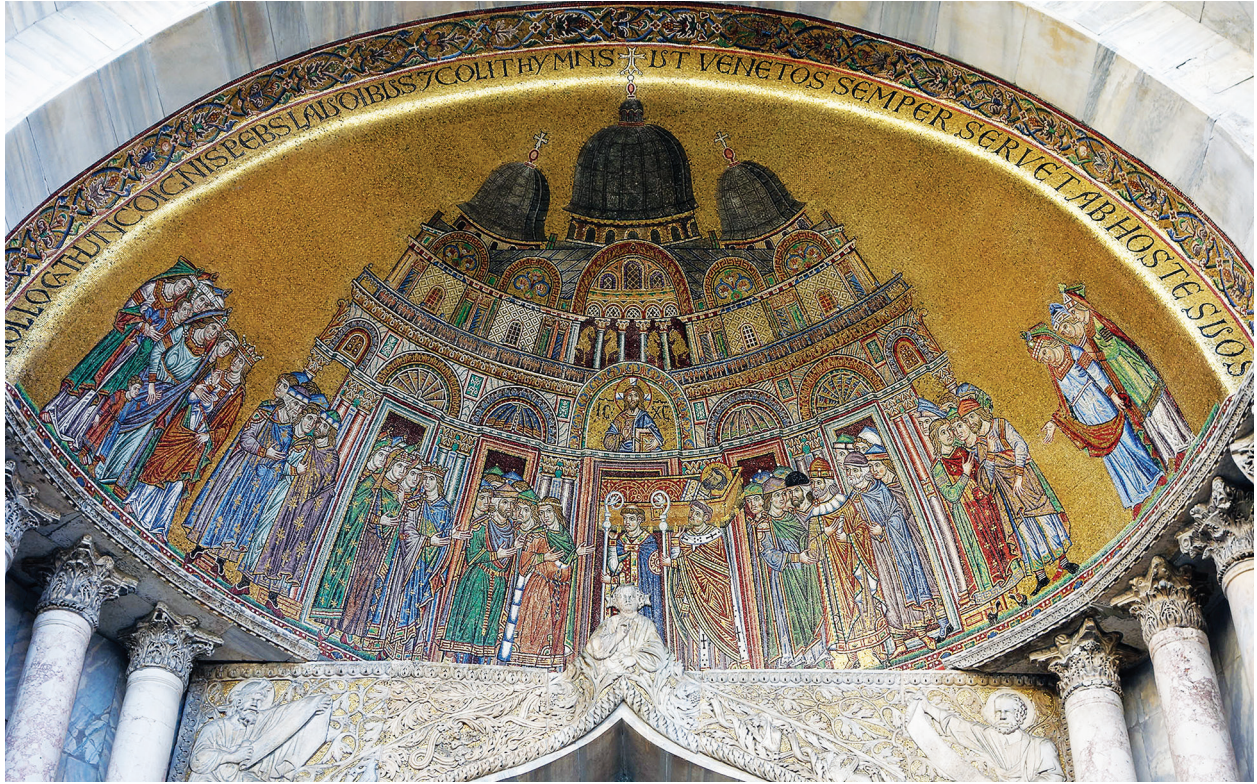


Fig. 12. San Marco, Venice, west façade, north portal (St. Alipio): translation of the body of St. Mark to San Marco (third quarter of the thirteenth century). Photo Steven Zucker (CCA 4.0).

Andrea Dandolo erected a lavish new chapel in San Marco to honor the martyr Isidore, Chios was therefore an important Genoese stronghold in the eastern Mediterranean, whence the city conducted military and commercial raids against Venice and its colonies. Claiming ownership over the body of Isidore, Venice not only beseeched the favor and protection of yet another saint, but also implicitly challenged the legitimacy of Genoese authority over Chios and—by extension—in the eastern Mediterranean.

Cambridge Medieval History, vol. 6, C. 1300–c. 1415, ed. M. Jones (Cambridge, 2000), 825–38. The standard reference on Chios in the later Middle Ages is P. P. Argenti, *The Occupation of Chios by the Genoese and Their Administration of the Island, 1346–1566: Described in Contemporary Documents & Official Dispatches* (Cambridge, 1958). On the Zaccaria in Chios, see, most recently, M. Carr, “Trade or Crusade? The Zaccaria of Chios and Crusades against the Turks,” in *Contact and Conflict in Frankish Greece and the Aegean, 1204–1453: Crusade, Religion and Trade between Latins, Greeks and Turks*, ed. N. G. Chrissis and M. Carr (Farnham, 2014), 115–34.

The imagery of the Chapel gave visual form to Venice’s claims. The basic components of the hagiographic cycle are reminiscent of the translation of St. Mark’s body from Alexandria to Venice as visualized on the façade and in the interiors of the basilica. In the first scene, Isidore takes the sea from the port of Alexandria. Just like the thirteenth-century mosaics of the life of St. Mark in the Zen Chapel, the image of Isidore’s departure evokes the Egyptian city through representation of the *Pharos*, its chief landmark (figs. 10–11). Analogously, the final scene of St. Isidore’s visual hagiography represents the solemn relocation of Isidore’s body in the Basilica of San Marco (fig. 9). Although more schematic, this scene unequivocally recalls the deposition of the evangelist’s relics in the Basilica, as it is represented above the Portal of Saint Alipio on the west façade of the church (fig. 12). Elisabeth Rodini perceptively noted the prominence given in the mosaics of the Basilica to the spatial, geographic dimension of Mark’s voyage from Egypt to Venice. Such topographic emphasis conferred

credibility on the sacred legend, but also manifested the reach of Venice's presence and claims in the eastern Mediterranean.³⁵ The mosaics of the Chapel of Sant'Isidoro, too, focus on seafaring: the cycle begins and ends with a voyage by sea. They also emphasize topography and geography, and celebrate Venetian proficiency in bridging distances. However, contrasting with the life of St. Mark, these mosaics also suggest contemporary military concerns. The city of Chios is represented as a fortified town, and Doge Domenico Michiel is prominently and repeatedly rendered as a military leader. In the scene of its arrival in Chios, the Venetian army disembarks from meticulously rendered dromons (long, oared warships) (fig. 9).³⁶ Also, the soldiers accompanying the doge are fully armed, and carry the standards with the winged lion of St. Mark that symbolized Venetian presence abroad. At a time of crisis in the fourteenth century, when Venice's Mediterranean hegemony was at peril, visual storying in the Chapel of Sant'Isidoro represented an opportunity to renew the city's military and political ambitions in the eastern Mediterranean, injecting the Venetian political elite and citizens with courage and optimism by visually reminding them of the power of their city overseas, and of its long tradition of engagement with the East. What, then, of St. John?

The cult of the Precursor was popular throughout the late medieval Mediterranean. More specifically, the dedication of baptisteries to his name across the Italian peninsula was routine, and Florence's grand exemplar—which had been decorated with lavish mosaics a few decades earlier (ca. 1270–1315), and which celebrated Florence's merchant power as much as it advertised its religious fervor and civic unity—may have stirred the interest of the Venetian government.³⁷ However, as the Venetians would have known, St. John was also a chief patron saint of Genoa, and this is likely to have lent topical inflections to the dedication.³⁸ The

Baptist's ashes were allegedly translated from the city of Myra to Liguria in 1098, and the saint was venerated in the cathedral of San Lorenzo at least since the twelfth century, when Pope Alexander III officially acknowledged the presence of the Precursor's ashes in Genoa (1179), and when a precious silver casket was commissioned for the preservation and veneration of his relics.³⁹

The cult of St. John received further impetus in the Duecento and Trecento. The earliest extant account of the translation of his relics to Genoa was written by the Genoese archbishop Jacopo da Varazze at the close of the thirteenth century, following the bestowal of indulgences on the Cathedral of San Lorenzo by Pope Innocent IV in the mid-century.⁴⁰ Possibly as an effect of this publicity, in 1299 a dedicated confraternity was instituted in the cathedral, and in 1312, Emperor Henry VII established a chaplaincy at the Precursor's altar.⁴¹ Eventually, the cult of St. John was officially regulated by the Genoese government in 1327, with a document that identified the Precursor as the "revered Father of the City." At this time, the Commune also commissioned a new silver casket for the preservation of the saint's ashes, and established that a solemn procession should be held every year on his feast day. On this occasion, the civic community and the political authorities of Genoa were to process to the saint's altar

santo a Genova e nel Genovesato in età medioevale," *Quaderni Franzoniani* 13, no. 2 (2000): 35–65.

39 Polonio Felloni, "L'arrivo delle ceneri," 38, on the papal recognition. For a discussion of the twelfth-century reliquary of St. John's ashes, see C. Di Fabio, "Il tesoro della cattedrale di Genova: Le origini (XII–XIV secolo)," in *Tessuti,oreficerie, miniature in Liguria XIII–XV secolo*, ed. A. R. Calderoni Masetti et al. (Bordighera, 1999), 103–34, at 111–22. On the date of arrival of the ashes in Genoa, see P. Riant, "Lettre sur la date exacte de l'arrivée à Gênes des reliques de S. Jean Baptiste," *Giornale Ligustico di archeologia, storia e letteratura* 11 (1884): 132–38.

40 The account is partially published in Iacobus da Varagine, "Legenda translationis Beatissimi Johannis Baptistae Genuam," in RHC HOcc, 5:229–35. See also Matheus de Nicolai de Porta, "Historia translationis reliquiarum B. Johannis Baptistae ad civitatem Januae," in RHC HOcc, 5:236–47. On Pope Innocent IV's sanction of the cult of the relics of St. John preserved in Genoa, see Polonio Felloni, "L'arrivo delle ceneri," 39.

41 On the confraternity, see C. Paolocci, "La Consortia di San Giovanni Battista nella cattedrale di Genova: Appunti per una storia," *Quaderni Franzoniani* 13, no. 2 (2000): 165–94. On the chaplaincy, see Polonio Felloni, "L'arrivo delle ceneri," 53, with further references.

35 E. Rodini, "Mapping Narrative at the Church of San Marco: A Study in Visual Storying," *Word & Image* 14, no. 4 (1998): 387–96.

36 L. R. Martin, *The Art and Archaeology of Venetian Ships and Boats* (London, 2001), 53.

37 For a recent and compelling discussion of the Florence Baptistery mosaics as public images, see G. R. Bent, *Public Painting and Visual Culture in Early Republican Florence* (New York, 2016), 221–71.

38 On the cult of the Precursor in Genoa, I primarily follow V. Polonio Felloni, "L'arrivo delle ceneri del Precursore e il culto al



Fig. 13. Cathedral of San Lorenzo, Genoa, north wall of the north aisle: St. John (right, fragmentary), St. George (center), and St. Peter (?) (left). Photo author; courtesy the Cattedrale Metropolitana di San Lorenzo, Genoa.

in the cathedral, offering a precious textile (pallium) and wax candles.⁴²

When the Venetian government commissioned the decoration of the Baptistry of San Marco with an extensive cycle of mosaics narrating the life of St. John, the civic veneration of the Precursor was evidently well established in Genoa, where the saint was also marshaled in connection with military undertakings, as well as against illnesses and epidemics. In 1342, Genoa celebrated a maritime victory off the coasts of Portugal with a solemn cortege throughout the city, carrying St. John's ashes alongside relics of the holy cross and other sacred tokens. Furthermore, in the wake of the Black Death in 1348, the citizens of Genoa sought the saint's protection, visiting his shrine in the cathedral

and touching the chains that protected the reliquary of the Baptist's ashes.⁴³

The rivalry between Venice and Genoa is unlikely to have been immaterial to the dedication of a new chapel to the Baptist in San Marco. Deploying the cult of saints in the service of specific political messages was an established practice in Venice.⁴⁴ In addition, textual evidence survives from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries that the enmity between Genoa and Venice led to their direct competition over the

42 Polonio Felloni, "L'arrivo delle ceneri," 54, with references.

43 Polonio Felloni, "L'arrivo delle ceneri," 56, with references.

44 For an introduction, see S. Tramontin, A. Niero, G. Musolino, and C. Candiani, *Culto dei santi a Venezia* (Venice, 1965). Recent additions to the rich literature on Venetian saintly cults include D. M. Perry, *Sacred Plunder: Venice and the Aftermath of the Fourth Crusade* (University Park, PA, 2015); and K. E. McCluskey, *New Saints in Late-Medieval Venice, 1200–1500: A Typological Study* (Abingdon, UK, 2020).

ownership of relics and holy bodies.⁴⁵ Finally, in 1386, Genoa specifically demanded (and obtained) from Pope Urban VI that those who visited their cathedral to venerate the Precursor's ashes on his feast day be granted the exact same indulgences that were bestowed upon those who visited San Marco on the feast day of the Ascension.⁴⁶

This episode provides eloquent witness to the enmeshment of saintly cults in the civic rivalry that opposed Genoa and Venice, and offers a plausible cue as to how to interpret the dedication of the new Baptistery of San Marco. Named after Genoa's holy protector, the Baptistery would have advertised the Precursor's favor toward Venice, implicitly challenging his partiality to Genoa. In this context, it seems relevant that the Baptistery of the Genoese cathedral had recently been renovated, in the early fourteenth century.⁴⁷ As part of the same campaign of restoration, the government had also commissioned a monumental image of St. John for the north wall of San Lorenzo (fig. 13). The fresco—now almost entirely lost—was part of a wider painterly program, now rather damaged, which Robert Nelson convincingly discussed in relation to a group of coeval Palaiologan paintings, particularly in the Church of Chora in Constantinople, and attributed to a Byzantine artist active in Genoa in the

first two decades of the Trecento.⁴⁸ In consideration of the ongoing competition between Genoa and Venice, it is tempting to approach the Byzantine frescoes in San Lorenzo as an artistic manifesto of Genoa's soaring claims in the East, and of its self-fashioning as an international power. The Baptistery of San Marco, decorated with expensive mosaic and replete with sophisticated and diverse visual references, may have functioned as Venice's scornful response.

Considered together, the Baptistery and Chapel of Sant'Isidoro provide powerful testimony to the significance of public imagery as a locus of articulation of political conflict and difference in the late medieval Mediterranean. Also, they suggest that the conceptual arsenal of artistic and visual "dualism," with its emphasis on one-to-one interactions between cultures, may not provide an adequate representation of the multifaceted aesthetic transactions that occurred at that time between artworks and viewers. The choice of Byzantine visual models was not exclusively expressive of binary relationships between the empire and the particular cultures that emulated it. Instead, the appropriation of Byzantine artistic language participated in complex networks of confrontation and competition, assisting rival powers—including Genoa and Venice—to stake their claims to Mediterranean hegemony.

In this context, what specific inflections did the choice of mosaic lend to the visual cycles of San Marco? In what measure did it sustain and advertise Venice's aspirations and its competitive stance against Genoa? And to what extent does it illuminate the broader nexus between aesthetics and politics in the late medieval Mediterranean? As I will argue in the next section, just as the war between Genoa and Venice, rooted in their hegemonic ambitions, spanned the

45 On Genoa's (real or fictive) appropriation of relics from Venice and other polities, see V. Polonio Felloni, "Devozioni di lungo corso: Lo scalo genovese," in *Genova, Venezia, il Levante nei secoli XII–XIV*, ed. G. Ortalli and D. Puncuh, Atti della Società ligure di storia patria, n.s., 41.1 (Genoa, 2001), 349–93, with further references. In turn, a relic of the milk of the Virgin Mary, previously in the possession of a Genoese citizen, was allegedly acquired by the Venetians in Koroni, following a sea battle against the Genoese, and deposited in San Marco, Venice, in 1350. The document was published in F. Cornaro, *Ecclesiae Venetae antiquis monumentis nunc etiam primum editis illustratae ac in decades distributae*, vol. 13.1 (10*), *De basilica ducali Sancti Marci evangelistae* (Venice, 1749), 277.

46 The document was published in A. Calcagnino, *Historia del glorioso Precursore di N. S. S. Gio. Battista, protettore della città di Genova* (. . .) (Genoa, 1648), 204–5. That the cult of St. John was deliberately deployed in 1386 as a means to compete with Venice was also noted by Polonio Felloni, "L'arrivo delle ceneri," 53.

47 C. Di Fabio, "Origini e vicende medievali del battistero della cattedrale di Genova," in *Il battistero di San Giovanni in San Lorenzo a Genova*, ed. C. Montagni (Genoa, 2011), 11–28 (figs. at pp. 143–48), esp. 20–21.

48 R. S. Nelson, "Byzantine Icons in Genoa before the *Mandyllion*," in *Intorno al Sacro Volto: Genova, Bisanzio e il Mediterraneo (secoli XI–XIV)*, ed. A. R. Calderoni Masetti, C. Dufour Bozzo, and G. Wolf (Venice, 2007), 79–92; R. S. Nelson, "A Byzantine Painter in Trecento Genoa: The Last Judgment at S. Lorenzo," *ArtB* 67, no. 4 (1985): 548–66. C. Di Fabio has written extensively about the fourteenth-century renovations of the cathedral. See especially C. Di Fabio, "Bisanzio a Genova fra XII e XIV secolo: Documenti e memorie d'arte," in *Genova e l'Europa mediterranea: Opere, artisti, committenti, collezionisti*, ed. P. Boccardo and C. Di Fabio (Milan, 2005), 41–67; and C. Di Fabio, "La chiesa di un comune senza 'palazzo': Uso civico e decorazione 'politica' della cattedrale di Genova fra XII e XIV secolo," in *Medioevo: La chiesa e il palazzo*, ed. A. C. Quintavalle (Milan, 2007), 302–16.

entire Mediterranean—so, too, the use of mosaic in the Baptistery and Chapel of Sant'Isidoro integrated the polemics against Genoa into a set of broader visual statements addressing Venice's rapidly evolving role on the international stage and within the Christian cosmos.

A Matter of Politics? Venetian Mosaics and Late Medieval Geographies of Power

In her recent study of medieval mosaic, Liz James brought scholarly attention to the pervasiveness of mosaic throughout the Mediterranean, and to its power to conjure up notions of authority and antiquity in Byzantine, Latin, and Islamic contexts.⁴⁹ Her work provides a valuable background against which to examine the programs of the Chapel of Sant'Isidoro and the Baptistery of San Marco, and to reconsider the efficacy of such interpretative categories as “dualism” and “hybridity” when applied to Venetian art in the Trecento.

Throughout the Middle Ages, extensive use of marble paneling and of mosaic—more expensive and visually more spectacular than wall painting—represented a way to advertise personal or public wealth, and the ability of individuals or communities to consume conspicuously.⁵⁰ The Chapel of Sant'Isidoro and the Baptistery were filled with mosaics, sculptures, and marble revetments. They ostensibly manifested Venice's prosperity and civic prowess, incidentally glossing over the severe challenges of the mid-century. However, such messages of public splendor were also interwoven with less overtly materialistic associations. Mosaic had been popular across the Mediterranean in late antiquity and early medieval times. It had become especially associated with the sacred topographies of early Christianity and of its main centers—Rome, Jerusalem, and Constantinople—and with the architectures of political authority, both Christian and Islamic. Based

on these connotations, mosaic continued to operate in later centuries as a privileged and flexible means to conjure up notions of sacredness, antiquity, religious charisma, and political legitimacy.⁵¹

Such broad associations would have been particularly meaningful in the fourteenth century, when sweeping geopolitical instability rekindled preoccupations with historical origin and political and religious legitimacy throughout the Mediterranean. At a time of increased fragmentation and diminishing imperial authority outside of Constantinople, mosaic was used by (rival) local rulers and members of the Byzantine elite to manifest their social aspirations and political ambitions. In 1283–1290, the despot of Epiros, Nikephoros I Komnenos, founded the metropolitan Church of the Virgin Parigoritissa in his capital, Arta, and had the interior of the church decorated with mosaic.⁵² This artistic medium—which is otherwise unattested in this region in the late Byzantine period—has convincingly been understood to convey the despot's imperial aspirations through lavish expenditure, and through use of an art form distinctively associated with imperial patronage.

Strategies of urban and social furtherance through artistic commissions were also pursued in well-established metropolitan areas, such as Thessalonike. Here, the much-contested patriarch Niphon I sponsored the decoration of the Church of the Holy Apostles, which included both paintings and mosaics, during his brief term of office (1310–1314).⁵³ At this time, the city hosted a division of the Byzantine imperial court, and its economic, political, and cultural importance reached a new zenith.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, mosaic work also continued in Constantinople, where members of the military and

49 L. James, *Mosaics in the Medieval World: From Late Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2017).

50 The exact cost of mosaics is difficult to establish accurately. However, on the basis of evidence from the Cathedral of Orvieto, it has been generally assumed that in the fourteenth century mosaic may have been up to four times more expensive than painting; for a detailed discussion of all costs involved in producing and installing mosaics, see James, *Mosaics in the Medieval World*, 107–19.

51 L. James, “Mosaic Matters: Questions of Manufacturing and Mosaicists in the Mosaics of San Marco, Venice,” in Maguire and Nelson, *San Marco, Byzantium, and the Myths of Venice*, 227–43. See also James, *Mosaics in the Medieval World*, esp. 1–60.

52 L. Theis, *Die Architektur der Kirche der Panagia Parëgorëtissa in Arta/Epirus* (Amsterdam, 1991).

53 The precise dating of the church and the nature of Niphon's involvement in its building and decoration have generated lively scholarly debates. For a summary of extant hypotheses, see C. Bakirtzis et al., *Mosaics of Thessaloniki: 4th to 14th Century* (Athens, 2012), 299–352, with further references.

54 On the city, see J. W. Barker, “Late Byzantine Thessalonike: A Second City's Challenges and Responses,” *DOP* 57 (2003): 5–33. On Venetian presence in Thessalonike, F. Thiriet, “Les Vénitiens à Thessalonique dans la première moitié du XIV^e siècle,” *Byzantion* 22 (1952): 323–32.

administrative elite commissioned mosaics as a way to advertise their social prestige and their close bonds with the imperial house. As is well known, the *protostrator* Michael Glabas and his wife Maria became involved with the Church of St. Mary Pammakaristos, building its parekklesion and decorating it with lavish mosaics in the first decade of the fourteenth century.⁵⁵ Shortly afterward, between 1316 and 1321, Theodore Metochites supervised the restoration of the Church of the Holy Savior in Chora, which encompassed the redecoration of its narthex and parekklesion with an extensive cycle of mosaics and frescoes.⁵⁶

Imperial patronage largely gave way to the sponsorship of wealthy and influential members of the military and bureaucratic elite in several important establishments across the city. However, in spite of political turmoil and economic difficulties, Byzantine emperors strove to maintain the church of Hagia Sophia, the emblem of imperial authority in the city. Significant portions of the eastern section of the church, including the eastern arch, collapsed in the 1340s as a result of earthquakes. Repair work, which comprised the restoration of mosaics, began immediately under John VI Kantakouzenos, amid intense dynastic strife. It was subsequently completed shortly after 1355 by John V Palaiologos, when he accessed the throne at the end of the civil war.⁵⁷

These examples demonstrate that mosaic continued to be a popular artistic medium in the late Byzantine world, where it was used by local governors and new elites to celebrate their (real or pretended) prestige, and by emperors to buttress ideas of religious and political continuity during times of conflict. However, the eastern Mediterranean had no monopoly on this technique. On the contrary, in the thirteenth and

fourteenth centuries mosaic was also widely employed in Italy, where it performed comparable functions.

The city-states of central Italy selectively used mosaics in ecclesiastical settings to prompt associations with antiquity, and to manifest political and religious connections with Rome.⁵⁸ Rome itself had, of course, been a capital of mosaic production since early Christian times, but new mosaic campaigns were also undertaken in the late Duecento and early Trecento at such key sites as the Lateran, Santa Maria Maggiore, Santa Maria in Trastevere, and San Pietro, among others. Executed at the behest of popes and wealthy cardinals, these campaigns manifest the complex matrix of papal authority and aristocratic rivalry that animated the city in the later Middle Ages.⁵⁹

Medieval visitors to the city—including the many Jubilee pilgrims traveling to Rome in 1350—experienced early mosaics in conjunction with those more recent additions. Such juxtaposition between old and new was a powerful trigger of historical and religious imagination. At one level, it made the apostolic past of Rome physically manifest; at another level, it asserted the continuity of papal authority over the city, even as this was increasingly challenged by political frictions and criticized by religious reformers in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.⁶⁰

From a Venetian perspective, Rome and the Byzantine East did not necessarily represent alternative, or mutually exclusive, terms of artistic reference. On the contrary, at least since the eleventh century, Venice had deployed mosaic—alongside artistic reuse and other strategies of visual emulation—to endorse the city's claims to an early Christian origin, to draw on the authority of Roman and Byzantine *imperium*, and to visualize Venice's relations with the trade capitals of the Islamic East.⁶¹ However, by the fourteenth century

55 The main reference is still H. Belting, C. A. Mango, and D. Mouriki, *The Mosaics and Frescoes of St. Mary Pammakaristos (Fethiye Camii) at Istanbul*, ed. C. A. Mango, Dumbarton Oaks Studies, vol. 15 (Washington, DC, 1978), 11–22.

56 Literature on this church is vast. On the dating, see the seminal study by P. A. Underwood, *The Kariye Djami*, vol. 1, *Historical Introduction and Description of the Mosaics and Frescoes*, Bollingen Series, vol. 70 (New York, 1966), 14–16.

57 N. B. Teteriatnikov, "The Last Palaiologan Mosaic Program of Hagia Sophia: The Dome and Pendentives," *DOP* 69 (2015): 273–96; and N. B. Teteriatnikov, "The Mosaics of the Eastern Arch of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople: Program and Liturgy," *Gesta* 52, no. 1 (2013): 61–84.

58 James, *Mosaics in the Medieval World*, 428–29 and 442–50.

59 Literature on late medieval mosaic campaigns in Rome is vast. For a concise and informative summary, and further references, see James, *Mosaics in the Medieval World*, 416–28 and 445–48. A thorough discussion of the relationship between mosaics, papal authority, and political frictions is J. Gardner, *The Roman Crucible: The Artistic Patronage of the Papacy, 1198–1304* (Munich, 2013).

60 James, *Mosaics in the Medieval World*, 427. The fourteenth-century mosaic campaigns in Rome and their implications are amply discussed in Gardner, *Roman Crucible*, 257–302.

61 The scholarly milestones for San Marco, and for its relationship with Byzantine architectural and artistic prototypes, are still

the power balances and geopolitical relations amongst Mediterranean polities had significantly changed. Also, Venice had itself become a major center of mosaic production. Thus, the semantic implications of mosaic are likely to have received a different inflection.

The significance of Venice's rivalry against Genoa in orienting the artistic choices of both cities in the mid-Trecento has already been commented on in the previous section. In addition, the stabilization of Venice's *dominio* overseas engendered other significant oppositions.⁶² These reached a climax in 1363, when Crete—one of Venice's chief and longest established possessions—revolted against the growing fiscal impositions of the central government. Before then, Zadar, Venice's main colony on the Dalmatian coast, rebelled in 1345, and was soon followed by Koper.⁶³ More locally, the mid-fourteenth century witnessed a gradual, but significant redefinition of Venice's relationship toward mainland Italy, ensuing in a series of disputes against Ferrara, Verona, and Padua, and in the submission of Treviso—Venice's first formal possession in mainland Italy—in 1339.⁶⁴

As Venice's territorial conquests grew in number and complexity, so did the variety of its visual

landscape. Many of Venice's eastern colonies had formerly belonged to the Byzantine empire, and Byzantine art, in its many local variants, represented their local visual idiom.⁶⁵ Also, as the case of Genoa demonstrates, Byzantine visual language represented an appealing visual choice for Venice's competitors in the East. In turn, other powerful cities of northern Italy, including Padua and Verona, had developed highly specific and locally rooted figural traditions, increasingly removed from Byzantine visual models. As a medium that evoked ideas of antiquity and power, mosaic presumably conveyed to all its viewers—Venetian citizens and new settlers, visitors and officers from the colonies, and representatives or subjects of allied or rival states—ideas about Venice's authority and Christian identity, and conjured up the city's far-reaching networks. Nevertheless, beyond the visual rhetoric of power and charisma that would be accessible to most viewers, the mosaics in San Marco are likely to have been received differently by different constituencies of beholders. Venice's well-traveled merchant elite, and visitors from the colonies, may have been inclined to situate the imagery of the Basilica within the visual landscapes of the Venetian commonwealth.⁶⁶ Pilgrims traveling through Venice may have been able to relate the Venetian mosaics to their counterparts in Rome, Constantinople, or the Holy Land. By contrast, mosaic would provide an unusual spectacle to visitors from the neighboring city-states of northern Italy, where the medium was used in late antiquity but more rarely employed in the Trecento. In an environment where the rhetoric of political authority and municipal identity rested heavily on visual propaganda and on competing claims to

O. Demus, *The Church of San Marco in Venice: History, Architecture, Sculpture* (Washington, DC, 1960), and idem, *Mosaics of San Marco in Venice*. On Venice's dual references to Rome and Constantinople, see Pincus, "Venice and the Two Romes." On early Christian models and Venetian ideas of "renascences," see O. Demus, "A Renaissance of Early Christian Art in Thirteenth-Century Venice," in *Late Classical and Mediaeval Studies in Honor of Albert Mathias Friend, Jr.*, ed. K. Weitzmann (Princeton, 1955), 348–61; and, more recently, H. L. Kessler, "The Cotton Genesis and Creation in the San Marco Mosaics," *CahArch* 53 (2009–10): 17–32. On the possible Islamic models of the mosaics of San Marco, particularly those of the atrium, see D. Howard, *Venice & the East: The Impact of the Islamic World on Venetian Architecture, 1100–1500* (New Haven, 2000), 77–88.

62 For a survey of the conflicts that occurred during Dandolo's dogate, see G. Ravegnani, "Dandolo, Andrea," *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani* (Rome: Treccani, 1986), http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/andrea-dandolo_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/, accessed 21 September 2017.

63 For a coeval account of the rebellion of Zara in 1345, seen from the Venetian perspective, see G. Ortalli and O. Pittarello, eds., *Cronica Jadretina: Venezia–Zara, 1345–1346* (Venice, 2014). The chronicle is likely to have been composed by Dandolo's chancellor, Benintendi Ravegnani.

64 G. M. Varanini et al., "Venezia e l'entroterra (1300 circa–1420)," in *Storia di Venezia*, 3:159–236, [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/la-formazione-dello-stato-patrizio-le-sfide-esterne-veneziane-e-l-entroterra_\(Storia-di-Venezia\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/la-formazione-dello-stato-patrizio-le-sfide-esterne-veneziane-e-l-entroterra_(Storia-di-Venezia)/), accessed 28 August 2017.

65 For a methodological and historical discussion of art, urbanism, and identity in the Venetian colonies, with focus on Crete, see M. Georgopoulou, *Venice's Mediterranean Colonies: Architecture and Urbanism* (Cambridge, 2001). See also S. E. J. Gerstel, ed., *Viewing the Morea: Land and People in the Late Medieval Peloponnese* (Washington, DC, 2013), for a perceptive discussion of the complex visual identities of medieval communities—including Venetian settlers—in the Morea.

66 For a critical analysis of political notions of "commonwealth," and a compelling discussion of the significance of poetic and artistic creativity in inspiring notions of community in the fourteenth century, see C. J. Campbell, *The Commonwealth of Nature: Art and Poetic Community in the Age of Dante* (University Park, PA, 2008), esp. 1–20. For an application of the term to Venice's early modern political history, see S. K. Sander-Faes, *Urban Elites of Zadar: Dalmatia and the Venetian Commonwealth (1540–1569)* (Rome, 2013).

antiquity and singularity, the medium of mosaic visually differentiated Venice from its direct neighbors. It advertised its wealth. And it emphasized the city's ancient apostolic origins, and its bonds with both Rome and the Christian East.

In addition to facing conflicts and oppositions within its new territories, with its local rivals, and with Genoa, Venice was compelled to negotiate its expansionist impetus with another long-lasting geopolitical development. While Byzantium, once the uncontested leader of the eastern Mediterranean, was gradually losing its political stability and hegemony, the rapid expansion of Ottoman power in the central decades of the century caused mounting concerns among Christian polities. Such preoccupations lay behind the revival of unionist inclinations in the Eastern and Western Churches, and fostered the creation of a (largely ineffectual) international league against the Turks in the 1330–1350s.⁶⁷ Although the league remained dormant for much of its existence, its creation entailed a reorientation of opinions and attitudes among Christian powers, increasingly aware of the common danger and of the need to face it together.⁶⁸ Venice's commercial interests and possessions in the Aegean and Asia Minor were most threatened by Turkish advances, particularly after Genoa sealed independent commercial agreements with Ottoman authorities. An early advocate of the Christian military consortium, Venice was appointed its leader by the pope in 1332, and remained a key player in subsequent defensive campaigns in the East. In this context, it seems plausible that Venice may have developed a new sensitivity to the strategic importance of concord among Orthodox and Latin communities, and to its own potential role—whether real or self-perceived—as political intermediary and guardian of Christianity in the East.

The importance attributed to Christian unity, and the renewed (if intermittent) amity between papal and Byzantine courts that ensued from their unionist campaigns, may have informed the ways in which

mosaic was viewed and understood.⁶⁹ This medium carried associations with Rome, Constantinople, and Jerusalem, and evoked their shared past. Thus, it was ideally suited to convey ideas about Christian solidarity, and to extol Venice's distinguished Christian pedigree at a time when the city's role as guardian of Christianity began to materialize, and when issues of authority and its lawful exercise became overbearing concerns, in the wake of the expansion and consolidation of Venice's colonial presence overseas.



As the discussion above testifies, conceptual oppositions between “East” and “West”—and related notions of artistic dualism—sit rather uncomfortably with the popularity of the medium of mosaic across the Mediterranean; with the density, ambivalence, and temporal depth of the interactions among late medieval polities and communities; and with the pivotal role that Venice played on the international stage at this time. At the opposite end of the terminological spectrum, the concept of hybridity—which emphasizes the contingent, situational aspect of identity formation—may appear as a more accurate descriptor of Venice's versatile and appropriative aesthetics in the later Middle Ages. However, the notion of hybridity is predicated on a theoretical opposition between “pure” cultures, which are fixed and final, and “hybrid” cultures, which are malleable and in flux. That this divide is largely artificial does not necessarily compromise its conceptual significance, and scholarly analyses of Venetian artistic hybridity have rightly illuminated the porous and fluid nature of the figurative language of the lagoon.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, describing Venice as artistically “hybrid” implicitly characterizes it as a fundamentally outward-facing culture. In turn, this undervalues the

67 For an introduction to the activities of the Christian League in the mid-fourteenth century, see P. Edbury, “Christians and Muslims in the Eastern Mediterranean,” in *New Cambridge Medieval History*, 6:864–84. For more details, see K. M. Setton, *The Papacy and the Levant (1204–1571)*, 4 vols. (Philadelphia, 1976–84), esp. 1:177–223.

68 A. Laiou, “Marino Sanudo Torsello, Byzantium and the Turks: The Background to the Anti-Turkish League of 1332–1334,” *Speculum* 45 (1970): 374–92.

69 J. Gardner has explicitly related the revival of mosaic in the late Duecento to Pope Gregory X's unionist efforts in the years leading to the second Council of Lyon (1274); and to Pope Nicholas IV's firsthand knowledge of the monuments of Constantinople, which he gained during an eighteen-month stay there that preceded his papacy. See Gardner, *Roman Crucible*, esp. 329–42.

70 See, for example, T. E. A. Dale, “Cultural Hybridity in Medieval Venice: Reinventing the East at San Marco after the Fourth Crusade,” in Maguire and Nelson, *San Marco, Byzantium, and the Myths of Venice*, 151–92; and M. Bacci, “Veneto-Byzantine ‘Hybrids’: Towards a Reassessment,” *Studies in Iconography* 35 (2014): 73–106.

importance of locality, continuity, and tradition—the bedrock of Venice’s aesthetic, historical, and political experience in the Trecento.⁷¹

To be sure, the Venetian government actively pursued an “aesthetic of variety” at San Marco, and exploited the rich semantics of mosaic to position Venice within an enclave of wealthy, politically influential, and cosmopolitan urban centers. However, artistic diversity in all its articulations—physical and functional reuse, visual and architectural appropriation, etc.—had itself become characteristic of Venetian aesthetic values; and mosaic had come to represent the quintessential expression of Venetian artistic traditions. Mosaic was made of glass, the material most directly and distinctively associated with Venetian manufacture and export. Also, it carried specific associations with San Marco, the state church of Venice. Here, mosaic had been employed uninterruptedly since the eleventh century, and continued to be in use throughout the Renaissance, long after the decline of the medium in Venice and elsewhere in the Mediterranean. Viewed from this perspective, the use of mosaic in the Baptistery and Chapel of Sant’Isidoro may not only be understood as an intimation of Venice’s wide-reaching cultural and political networks, but also as a visual affirmation of continuity, and thus of stability and order, at times of deep unsettlement. In turn, this provides a useful cue to interpret the overall iconography of the two shrines. As will be suggested in the next section, the Baptistery and Chapel of Sant’Isidoro drew on a vast, visually diverse vocabulary of power and charisma to conjure an image of Venice as a legitimate, orderly, and unfaltering Christian state, at a time when its authority and the means through which it was exercised were intensely challenged.

Imaging Authority in Times of Change: Imperialism and Ecumenism in the Mosaics of San Marco in the Fourteenth Century

Authority and its lawful exercise are core iconographic concerns of the program of the Chapel of Sant’Isidoro. Here, the doge’s endorsement is presented as the condition upon which rests the legitimacy of the theft of the saint’s body from Chios. The third scene in the upper register of the north vault depicts Doge Domenico Michiel as he reprimands the cleric Cerbanus Cerbani

for stealing Isidore’s body (fig. 9). As we know from written accounts, the doge subsequently consented to the translation of the relics to Venice. However, this decision was reached at the end of a formal assembly, after the cleric demonstrated that he had carried out the theft with divine consent.⁷² This orderly procedure is in stark contrast with both textual and visual accounts of the translation of St. Mark’s body from Egypt to Venice, which had occurred at the initiative of two private citizens and without any official endorsement by the Venetian government.⁷³ Inversely, the translation of Isidore’s body is represented as an official, state enterprise: the doge oversees the loading of the martyr’s relics onto the Venetian ship, and witnesses their ceremonial deposition in the Church of San Marco in the final scene.

Questions of order, authority, and investiture are also pivotal in the Baptistery program, which situates them firmly within the theological realm and renders them visually through a varied repertoire of images alternatively adapted from late Byzantine models and from local artistic traditions.

Emphasis on authority and its bestowal is particularly explicit in the choice of the Mission of the Apostles for the decoration of the central dome (fig. 6). The relevant gospel passage makes specific reference to questions of power and its transmission, as Jesus “called the Twelve together and gave them power and authority,” before sending them to proclaim the kingdom of God (Luke 9:1–2). In her analysis of this dome, Pincus demonstrates the topical significance of this iconography of Byzantine origin, convincingly relating it to Venice’s colonial claims.⁷⁴ Each apostle is represented in the dome as he performs the sacrament of baptism in a different region of the world. These regions are all carefully labeled, and the characters animating the scenes are meticulously differentiated by means of colorful costumes and facial features. This topographic

72 Cerbani, “Translatio,” 329–31.

73 According to Venetian accounts of the legend, St. Mark’s body was stolen from its resting place in Alexandria by two Venetian merchants. For a brief account of the theft, and a succinct critical review of primary sources, see P. J. Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1990), esp. 88–94.

74 Pincus, “Venice and Its Doge,” 259, relates this iconography to a ninth-century Byzantine manuscript of the Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, grec 510, folio 426v.

71 Brown, *Venice and Antiquity*, 31–45.

accuracy is a primary example of Venetian self-concerned maneuvering of sacred history. The regions of the apostles' missions marked the broadest stretch of Venice's own commercial empire, and the ultimate horizon of the city's economic and political claims. Thus, the Mission of the Apostles—similarly to the visual hagiography of St. Isidore—both reflected and legitimized Venice's international ambitions.⁷⁵

Venice's role as the leader of the Anti-Turkish League, paired with the revival of unionist tendencies at this time, may provide an additional interpretative cue to the iconography of the dome. The cupola did, after all, bring together all Christianized lands, and the Mission of the Apostles was an image of Christian unity in difference. As such, it may have echoed coeval concerns with ecumenism, and Venice's emerging self-perception as appointed champion of Christianity. As a leading Christian principality, the mosaic intimates, it was Venice's responsibility to defend and renew Christian presence in the Mediterranean, taking it upon itself to continue and perfect the mission started by St. Mark, patron of the city, and by his companions.⁷⁶

The imagery of the western and eastern bays further articulates ideas of power and its transmission. At the summit of the western barrel vault, conspicuous rays of light connect the effigy of the Ancient of Days to the prophets below him; and a similar luminous beam descends onto Christ in the scene of the Baptism, manifesting the illuminating power of divine grace and the authority that proceeds from divine investiture (see figs. 5 and 2). The iconographic type of the Ancient of Days (based on the prophetic vision in Daniel I), was uncommon in late medieval Italy, but widespread in the monumental and portable arts of the late Byzantine and orthodox world. Byzantine theologians alternatively identified the object of this vision as God the

Father, Christ, or the manifestation of the divine glory that was shared by the Father and Son. Regardless of these theological differences, most medieval commentators interpreted the Ancient of Days as an image of power and dominion over time, and as a visual metaphor for the bestowal of divine authority onto Christ.⁷⁷ As an image that addressed universal power, its origin and its transfer, the Ancient of Days represented an ideal incipit to the religious and political program of the Baptistery.

Questions of authority and investiture also lie at the heart of the quasi-apocalyptic imagery of the eastern dome (fig. 7). Medieval understandings of the Last Judgment, which the dome evokes, rested on the idea that human history would culminate in an authoritative legal process.⁷⁸ In addition, as promulgators of divine dispositions, angels were specifically identified by medieval political theory as embodiments of the law.⁷⁹ And the very idea of an orderly hierarchy of angels had long been conceptualized as the heavenly model of earthly *taxis*, both in Byzantium and in the West.⁸⁰

Ensuing from their theological importance, cherubs, seraphs, and other angelic figures regularly feature in Byzantine domes as attendants of Christ, either physically supporting his mandorla, or surrounding the central image of the Pantokrator or the Virgin and Child. In other instances, angelic throngs occupy the lower portions of the dome or drum, as in the pareklesion of the Chora Church in Constantinople; or they feature as participants in the Heavenly Liturgy, particularly in late medieval fresco cycles across the Balkans. However, monumental renditions of the nine angelic orders, though conceptually developed in the

75 D. Pincus, "Geografia e politica nel battistero di San Marco: La cupola degli apostoli," in *San Marco: Aspetti storici e agiografici*, ed. A. Niero (Venice, 1996), 459–73.

76 M. da Villa Urbani associated coeval concerns with ecumenism with another detail of the Baptistery program. The spandrels below the central and eastern domes feature representations of the Eastern and Western doctors of the Church respectively. However, the Greek Fathers hold scrolls inscribed in Latin, while their Latin counterparts are depicted writing their books in Greek. Da Villa Urbani tentatively explained the "inversion" of Greek and Latin with reference to Venice's concerns with Christian unity. M. da Villa Urbani, "Le iscrizioni nei mosaici di San Marco: Alcune novità nei testi e proposte di lettura," in Niero, *San Marco*, 334–42.

77 See G. K. McKay, "The Eastern Christian Exegetical Tradition of Daniel's Vision of the Ancient of Days," *JECChrSt* 7, no. 1 (1999): 139–61; and G. K. McKay, "Illustrating the Gospel of John: The Exegesis of John Chrysostom and Images of the Ancient of Days in Eleventh-Century Byzantine Manuscripts," *Studies in Iconography* 31 (2010): 51–68.

78 K. Shoemaker, "The Devil at Law in the Middle Ages," *RHR* 228, no. 4 (2011): 567–86. For a compelling discussion of the connections between baptismal rite, the decoration of late medieval baptisteries, and the apocalypse, see Anne Derbes, "Washed in the Blood of the Lamb: Apocalyptic Visions in the Baptistery of Padua," *Speculum* 91, no. 4 (2016): 945–97.

79 S. Sinding-Larsen, *Christ in the Council Hall: Studies in the Religious Iconography of the Venetian Republic*, *ActaIRNorv*, 5:173.

80 See D. Keck, *Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1998), 67, and n. 90, with further references.

late antique East by pseudo-Dionysios the Areopagite, are uncommon in Byzantium.⁸¹ Instead, they became common currency in the painterly traditions of late medieval Europe, where angelic hierarchies offered a visual translation of coeval notions of order, both social and cosmic.⁸²

In Italy, the popularity of this subject in the middle decades of the Trecento was spurred by Mendicant theologies and ongoing disputes about the nature and time of the blessed souls' beatific vision.⁸³ Representations of the nine angelic orders were particularly frequent in baptisteries, where they symbolized the spiritual network joined by the neophyte through Christian initiation.⁸⁴ In addition, they were considered a suitable subject matter for the decoration of politically charged spaces. These include the Palatine Chapel of the lords of Padua, which was frescoed by Guariento di Arpo at the exact same time as the Venetian Baptistery was decorated with mosaic. Guariento's angelic hosts offer very close iconographic comparisons for the Venetian dome, and are suggestive of the intense artistic contacts between Venice and Padua at this time.⁸⁵ More generally, angelic hosts appeared frequently in the portable and monumental arts of the Trecento, in association with the Virgin and Child enthroned, the Coronation of the Virgin, or the Last Judgment. Each of these subjects presented the viewer with a different, but equally potent, vision of divine authority and its bestowal.⁸⁶

81 On the theological genesis of the nine orders of angels in early Syrian writings, see B. Bruderer Eichberg, *Les neuf chœurs angéliques: Origine et évolution du thème dans l'art du Moyen Âge* (Poitiers, 1998), 8–9.

82 Bruderer Eichberg, *Les neuf chœurs*, 9.

83 C. A. Fleck, "Blessed the Eyes That See Those Things You See: The Trecento Choir Frescoes at Santa Maria Donnaregina in Naples," *ZKunstg* 67, no. 2 (2004): 201–24. On Franciscan angelology, see Keck, *Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages*, 129–59.

84 Keck, *Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages*, 165–66.

85 Z. Murat, *Guariento: Pittore di corte, maestro del naturale* (Milan, 2016), 32–36, 69–72, 91–93, 142–47; D. Banzato, F. Flores d'Arcais, and A. M. Spiazzi, eds., *Guariento e la Padova Carrarese* (Venice, 2011), 129–59. See also I. Hueck, "Proposte per l'assetto originario delle tavole del Guariento nell'ex Cappella Carrarese di Padova," in *Attorno a Giusto de' Menabuoi: Aggiornamenti e studi sulla pittura a Padova nel Trecento*, ed. A. M. Spiazzi (Treviso, 1994), 83–96.

86 For a comprehensive discussion of the iconography of angelic hierarchies in the West, see Bruderer Eichberg, *Les neuf chœurs*. On angels in Italian painting, see F. Buranelli, *Between God and*

The Venetian government had excellent reasons to reflect upon the sources and proceedings of authority. As already discussed, the expansion of its dominion overseas deeply transformed the extent and structures of the Venetian state, and its relationships with neighboring polities. The conflict with Genoa challenged Venice's stability and prosperity in the short and long term. And the Ottoman advance in the East permanently modified the political chessboard of the Mediterranean, reconfiguring extant political and diplomatic networks. The mosaics of the Baptistery and Chapel of Sant'Isidoro, with their emphasis on legitimacy, investiture, and unity in difference, illuminate the complex strategies of visual representation through which the Venetian government responded to this evolving cultural and political landscape, and the ways in which history (both sacred and secular) was mobilized to confront uncertainty. In doing so, the fourteenth-century mosaics of San Marco invite us to revisit the broader significance of the visual at times of instability and change, in Venice and beyond.

Conclusion

As Susan Sontag perceptively wrote, our understanding of the visual qualities of a given work of art is always charged with—and often predetermined by—an awareness of the work's historicity, and results from a precise historical consciousness.⁸⁷ This, I would argue, was also true in fourteenth-century Venice. Here, a new sense of history, and of Venice's place in the Christian cosmos, was rapidly developing in the face of new challenges and threats. The mosaics of San Marco are a powerful manifestation of the complexity and ambivalence of these transformations, which were at once cultural and political.

To begin with, they demonstrate the extent to which religious, cultural, and political identities were constructed through difference and antagonism. Conflict against Genoa, rivalry with neighboring Italian city-states, struggles to retain power in the colonies, concerns with Christian unity against the Ottoman threat—all contributed to shape Venetian

Man: Angels in Italian Art, Annie Laurie Swaim Hearin Memorial Exhibition Series (Jackson, MI, 2007).

87 S. Sontag, "On Style," in eadem, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York, 2001), 18.

visual language in the Trecento, and informed the ways in which images and artworks were received by their viewers. Secondly, the mosaics of the Baptistry and Chapel of Sant'Isidoro gesture to the power of images to authenticate (and fabricate) reality. Venice's new self-image as protector of Christianity and guardian of its values in the East was constructed through images as well as through actual military action. Similarly, nascent ideas of a Venetian dominion encompassing both mainland Italy and overseas territories materialized in the juxtaposition of political iconographies that were common among the city-states of Italy, with visual types that were used in the arts of the Byzantine world to convey ideas of power, legitimacy, and the transmission of authority. Crucially, the mosaics indicate that artistic interaction was rarely the result of a binary process between two communities or cultures. Instead, it took place within thick, and multidirectional, political and cultural networks, which, in the case of Venice, included Genoa, Rome, Constantinople, and Thessalonike; Padua and the Veneto; and the commercial entrepôts of the Adriatic and the Aegean, North Africa, the Balkans, and the Peloponnese, where Venice had long established its presence.

The fourteenth century was a turning point in the development of Venice's self-perception as a "triumphant city."⁸⁸ However, as I have argued, Venice fought

its battle for international hegemony in an exceedingly intricate environment. In this context, the visual programs of the Baptistry and Chapel of Sant'Isidoro did not merely manifest Venice's grand ambitions, though they did that too. Instead, they represented instruments of crisis management. They channeled messages of institutional continuity, political legitimacy, religious unity, and cultural cosmopolitanism in times of unprecedented instability. In so doing, they renewed the sense of purpose and belonging of Venetian governors and civic community. They nourished their faith in the possibility of regeneration. Most importantly, the mosaics offered their beholders a vision of what Venice could become—reminding us, too, of the power of the visual to inform collective aspirations and initiate communal actions, ultimately transforming the ways in which we imagine, and act upon, the world.

ASK Research Center
Department of Social and
Political Sciences
Bocconi University
Via Roentgen 1
20136 Milan
stefania.gerevini@unibocconi.it

88 I have borrowed this designation from E. Crouzet-Pavan, *Venice Triumphant: The Horizons of a Myth* (Baltimore, 2002). See

also E. Crouzet-Pavan, *"Sopra le acque salse": Espaces, pouvoir et société à Venise à la fin du Moyen Âge* (Rome, 1992).

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